

**M A R X I S M**

**an introductory course  
in five parts**

**The Labour  
Movement  
in Britain**

*Fourpence*



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## PART 4

# THE LABOUR MOVEMENT IN BRITAIN

### Lesson I

## CLASSES IN CAPITALIST SOCIETY

### (a) Bourgeoisie and Proletariat

As we saw in Part 2 of this course (*Capitalist Society*), there are two basic classes in capitalist society: the owners of the means of production, the *capitalists* or *bourgeoisie*; and those who work for wages or salaries, the *working class* or *proletariat*. They are basic in the sense that without them the capitalist mode of production cannot be carried on.

The first capitalists developed within feudal society from sections of the merchants, master-craftsmen and landed gentry who had accumulated sufficient money from trade to begin to carry on capitalist production, i.e., to employ wage-labour. By the middle of the seventeenth century they had become powerful enough to make themselves the ruling class, by the revolutionary



seizure of State power (see Part 3, *Democracy and the State*). But even after this, the extent of capitalist production remained limited for more than a hundred years. As late as 1769 it was estimated that, out of a total population of less than 9 million,  $3\frac{1}{2}$  million depended for their livelihood on agriculture and 3 million on manufacture, while no less than 600,000 were unemployed paupers. And both in agriculture and the manufacturing industries the greater part of production was still carried on, not by capitalists, but by small independent farmers or peasants and independent artisans and handicraft workers who themselves owned the means of production. Thus the number of wage-labourers or proletarians remained small; and they were widely scattered.

In the next hundred years, however, the numbers of both capitalists and proletarians rapidly increased as a result of a series of revolutionary technical developments in agriculture and in industry. Since the former made large-scale capitalist farming much more profitable, the ruling class, still dominated by the capitalist landowners, "enclosed"—i.e. stole by Acts of Parliament—more than 4 million additional acres of land between 1760 and 1820 alone. Thousands of small farmers and peasants were thus expropriated, driven from their land and cottages, and thus deprived of their means of independent livelihood. At the same time the Industrial Revolution, making possible large-scale factory production based on power-driven machinery, led to the ruin and expropriation of thousands of independent artisans, who could not compete with the cheaper products of the capitalist factories.

It was from these ruined and expropriated peasants and artisans that the modern proletariat developed into a class. Deprived of their living as independent producers, they became paupers and were compelled to seek



employment, on any terms that would give them a bare existence, in the new industrial towns that were springing up in the midlands and the north. To speed up the process, the capitalist State introduced a new Poor Law, which substituted for the old form of "Parish relief" the much harsher system of work-houses; or, as they were called by the workers, "bastilles". It was through the savage exploitation of this new working class that Britain became the foremost capitalist country, the "workshop of the world". The population increased by leaps and bounds: from 10½ million in 1800 to 21 million in 1850, and 37 million in 1900. But while the new industrial capitalists began to supplant the capitalist landowners as the wealthiest and most powerful section of the ruling class, the great majority of the people were degraded from independent producers to wage-labourers or proletarians. And their numbers were further increased by the importation of cheap labour from abroad, particularly from the ruined Irish peasantry. Thus more and more the people were split into two main classes of exploiters and exploited, oppressors and oppressed: capitalists and workers, or bourgeoisie and proletariat.

In the final stage of capitalism, this general tendency has developed even more rapidly. On the one hand, the continual increase in the size of individual enterprises, which is the basis of monopoly capitalism, has led to the increasing concentration of the means of production in the hands of a smaller and smaller minority of finance capitalists. On the other hand, the growing mechanisation of agriculture, as well as of industry, has more and more tended to iron out differences between one form of manual work and another, thus reducing the distinctions between workers in various branches of industry.

But while it is important to understand this tendency,



it is equally important to realise that it is *only* a tendency. Although monopoly capitalism increasingly dominates the whole economic life of the country, the earlier forms of capitalist production persist. At the same time, in spite of the growing uniformity of labour, the old sectional distinctions between one craft and another, between skilled and unskilled labour, between white collar and manual workers, also continue.

### **(b) The "Middle Classes"**

In addition to these two basic classes, however, it remains to say something of the "middle classes". In the strict sense of the word, the only real "middle" class consists of the remnants of the old independent craftsmen, working farmers and shop-keepers and some professional workers. In so far as their tools, businesses or professional practices belong to them, they can be said to own the means of production. But since this ownership does not enable them to live on the labour of others, they are not capitalists. Nor, since they do not depend on the sale of their labour power, do they belong to the proletariat. As "workers on their own account", they occupy an intermediate or "middle" position between the capitalists and the working class. But with the development of capitalism the increasing competition of large-scale production is continually reducing their numbers and driving them into the proletarian ranks.

But the term "middle classes" is also often used to include those people employed in industry and, increasingly, in the professions, who, while they are in the main dependent on wages or salaries for their livelihood, supplement this income from investments in industry or property, either inherited or bought out of savings. Such people also occupy an intermediate position in society; but they do not form a distinct social class, because their relation to the means of production



is essentially unstable. A few find their way into the exploiting class; considerable numbers become social parasites, living on unearned income; but the majority of them, especially in the period of capitalist decline, may be more accurately described as semi-proletarians. This is borne out by the fact that, in the face of growing insecurity and frustration in their work, increasing numbers of this section of the people are coming to identify themselves with the working class. While with the growing nationalisation of the social services, more and more professional workers—for example doctors—are in fact becoming full-time salaried State employees.

In any case, neither numerically nor politically do they constitute a decisive class in modern capitalist society. Today, only 6 per cent of the employed population in Britain are "workers on their own account", while 90 per cent work for wages and salaries, from which they derive all but a small fraction of their income. This can be illustrated in another way, by considering the distribution of the national wealth. In 1936 there were 25.2 million people in Britain aged 25 and upwards. Of these, 19 million owned an average of £37 each; and a further  $4\frac{1}{2}$  million an average of £430. Both of these groups clearly depended entirely on selling their labour-power, i.e. were proletarians. Next came two groups: one of  $1\frac{1}{4}$  million owning an average of £2,300, and the other of  $\frac{1}{4}$  million owning an average of £7,700. These two groups together constituted 6.1 per cent of the total; corresponding to the "middle classes". But the remaining  $\frac{1}{4}$  million, the capitalists, owned no less than 55 per cent of the total wealth of the country; and of these, 90,000 owned £6,643 million, i.e. 40 per cent of the total, and an average of £73,000 each. Today, though the total amount of wealth has changed, the proportions in which it is divided remain broadly speaking the same, since the capitalist owners of industries



which have been nationalised have received the equivalent value, or more, in the form of Government bonds, and still derive the income on these from the exploitation of the workers.

### (c) Class Struggle and Class Organisation

The fundamental cause of the class struggle in capitalist society is the economic exploitation of the working class by the capitalist class; the fact that the owners of the means of production appropriate the surplus value created by the workers (see Part 2 of this course, *Capitalist Society*). But since the exploitation is only possible because the capitalist class is also the ruling class, the conflict of *economic* interests inevitably gives rise to a conflict of *political* interests. It is in order to carry on this struggle that both classes organise themselves. To protect their economic interests, the capitalists have created such bodies as Chambers of Commerce and the Federation of British Industries, while to protect their political interests they have built up the Conservative Party. But the decisive means by which they maintain their political position is their control of the State, of the whole administrative machinery of government, based on organised force (see Part 3, *The State and Democracy*).

Similarly, as the proletariat gradually increased in numbers and became more and more aware of its common interests as a class, it too began to organise. In the fight against exploitation, the workers formed trade unions and co-operative societies, and later developed their own political parties. These permanent organisations constitute the core of the Labour movement.

But the class struggle also takes a third form: the ideological struggle or battle of ideas. The capitalists control the principal means of propaganda and education and are thus able to impose *their* ideas of law and



order, of morality, of democracy and justice, on the mass of the people. Gradually, however, the workers realise that these ideas are false and begin to develop an independent class-consciousness, corresponding to their own interests. Their activities as trade unionists and co-operators bring them increasingly into conflict with capitalist economic teaching, and this leads them to question the political and legal conceptions of the ruling class. But they only reach the highest form of class-consciousness when they recognise the necessity of winning State power in order to sweep away capitalist society and begin to build Socialism. That is why the development of the *science* of Socialism by Marx and Engels, and its continuation by Lenin and Stalin, represents a great turning point in the history of the class struggle. But since the very conditions of capitalism prevent the great mass of the workers from learning about Marxism, the struggle for *Socialism* can only be led by a Party which, basing its policy on the theory of Marxism, can help the Labour movement to grasp the truth of this theory from their own practical experience.

### Questions for Discussion

1. *Give examples of how the increasing mechanisation of agriculture, as well as industry, tends "to iron out differences between one form of manual work and another", and consider how this affects trade union organisation.*
2. *How does the development of monopoly capitalism create the basis for forms of joint political and economic action between the working class and sections of the "middle classes"?*
3. *What are some of the principal ideas around which the "battle of ideas" is being fought today, and how can the workers best carry on the class struggle in this field?*



## Lesson II

### THE LABOUR MOVEMENT TAKES SHAPE

#### (a) Revolutionary Beginnings

The attempts of the independent peasants and artisans to resist the enclosures and the factory system—by pulling down fences, burning ricks and smashing machinery—reached its climax in the Luddite movement (1812), which was suppressed by armed force.

The first trade unions developed spontaneously on a local and temporary basis in the form of “combinations” of workers to prevent wages and standards of living being forced below the minimum level of subsistence. In other words, the primary purpose of the trade unions was, as it still is, the fight against exploitation by means of collective bargaining. By 1799 they were already sufficiently effective for the ruling class to pass the Combination Acts, which made trade unionism illegal. Though driven underground, however, the struggle to organise continued; and by 1824 the courage and growing solidarity of the workers forced the repeal of the Acts.

In the 1830s, the working class began to develop its political demands for the franchise, free speech and press, the right to hold meetings and to organise. Nevertheless, in its first stages, the political movement was dominated by the rising industrial capitalists, who won democratic rights for themselves by the Reform



Act of 1832, and thus established themselves as part of the ruling class.

It was in these circumstances that *Chartism* (1836-48), the first independent political movement of the working class, developed. But though many of its leaders were deeply influenced by the Utopian Socialism of Robert Owen (1771-1858), the Charter was not a Socialist programme. Its demands—"equal" rights to vote and enter Parliament, and equal electoral districts as between the new industrial towns and the agricultural districts still dominated by the great landlords—were, however, in that period revolutionary demands. And this was recognised by the capitalist class, which used the full power of the State machine, including the police and armed forces, to beat down the Chartist movement, which in spite of huge petitions, monster demonstrations, attempts at a general strike and armed insurrection, was defeated.

The *Consumers' Co-operative* movement also took firm hold in the 1840s. From the beginning of the century, various attempts had been made, largely under the leadership of Robert Owen, to form *producer* co-operatives. These had not been very successful, but the idea of co-operation now began to take another form. In their fight against the wholesale adulteration of food and the "truck" system (by which the employers forced their workers to buy from their shops), the workers began to experiment with *consumer* co-operatives. And by 1844 the Rochdale Pioneers had found the new form of co-operative store, which proved to be the solid basis for further development of the movement.

### **(b) Consolidation and Reform**

In 1851, during a great strike for the 60-hour week and trade union recognition, a number of small local



unions in the engineering industry came together to form the Amalgamated Society of Engineers, forerunner of the A.E.U. And their example was soon followed by workers in other trades.

Unlike the earlier unions, these new craft unions were *permanent* organisations on a *national*, instead of a local, scale; and their development led to further organisational development. For instance, the London Trades Council, forerunner of many others and eventually of the Trades Union Congress (1868), arose in the course of a great strike of the building workers for trade union rights.

But the consolidation of the trade union position could not be achieved without political action. For although since 1824 trade unions had ceased to be illegal bodies, they could still be penalised for many forms of activity. Picketing, for instance, could be punished as conspiracy; while strikers could get three months' hard labour for "breach of contract" under the Master and Servant Act. (Even as late as 1867, the last year before its repeal, over 10,000 workers were sentenced for this "crime".) The Trade Union Acts of 1871-5, which at last established the legal rights of trade unions, were therefore an important political advance. At the same time, alongside large sections of the lower middle-class who were still deprived of parliamentary representation, it was the craft unions that led the renewed struggle for manhood suffrage. By 1867 they had won the vote for the town workers, and this was extended in 1884 to the agricultural labourers.

But in spite of this, and though, as members of the First International (organised in London, 1864-72, by Karl Marx) some of their leaders were associated with broader forms of working-class politics, there was no corresponding development of *Socialist consciousness* amongst the members of the craft unions as a whole.



Having succeeded in winning *economic* concessions from the capitalists by trade union struggle—often at the expense of the unorganised sections of the workers, then more than nine-tenths of the proletariat as a whole—they had more and more come to regard *politics*, not as the struggle for working-class power, but as the means by which a privileged section of the workers could achieve economic and political *reforms* for themselves within capitalist society. Thus instead of becoming Socialists, they remained Liberals. Some of their leaders were elected as Liberal M.P.s, while others were rewarded by the capitalists with appointments as members of Government Commissions and even as junior Ministers.

### (c) Towards a Working-Class Party

This growth of *reformism* was the result of the expansion of national capitalism and the transition to imperialism on the one hand; and, on the other, of the absence of a Socialist outlook and theory. But before the end of the century the leadership of this trade union "aristocracy", bribed by a share in the super-profits flowing into Britain from the exploitation of the colonies, was challenged by a new mass movement.

The *Communist Manifesto*, written by Marx and Engels and published in 1848, had little effect on the British working class at that time. But forty years later their theories were becoming known to a small group, mainly as a result of the propaganda of the Social Democratic Federation. It was under this Socialist influence that some of the members of the old craft unions, like Tom Mann (1856-1941), threw themselves into the leadership of great mass struggles (the dock-labourers, gas-workers, etc.) which enormously broadened the basis of *class* organisation by extending trade unionism to the unskilled workers. What was still



needed, however, was a mass working-class political party, independent of the Liberals.

By the end of the nineteenth century there were three small parties—the Social Democratic Federation (1885), semi-Marxist but sectarian; the Fabian Society (1884), middle-class and openly reformist; and the Independent Labour Party, founded in 1893 by Keir Hardie (1856-1915)—which, rejecting the theory of the class struggle, combined bourgeois radical theories with a vague form of “Christian Socialism”. But in 1899, mainly under I.L.P. influence and pressure from the “new unions” the T.U.C. set up the Labour Representation Committee, consisting of delegates from the trade unions and the various Socialist societies, to ensure independent representation of the working class in Parliament; and in 1906, with the election of twenty-nine M.P.s, it became the Labour Party. But, influenced by the theories of gradualism and class collaboration advocated by the Fabian Society, both the political leaders and many of the trade union leaders came more and more to identify themselves with the capitalists and with British imperialism.

Meanwhile, however, faced by a fall in “real wages” of 10 per cent, there was a mounting wave of mass struggle by the trade unions, culminating in the first *national* strikes of railwaymen and of miners in 1911-12. The Liberal Government did not hesitate to “introduce politics into the trade unions” by calling in the troops against the Tonypandy miners and by bringing gunboats up the Mersey to intimidate the striking transport workers.

#### **(d) Imperialist War**

The war of 1914-18 marked the end of a period of comparatively “peaceful” development of capitalism. Henceforward the class struggle was to become increas-



ingly a struggle for power, waged on an international as well as a national scale.

The tendencies leading to war and its fundamental cause—the sharpening struggle between the imperialist powers for new colonial markets and sources of raw materials—had been clearly shown by the Marxist leaders of the Second International (1889-1914). But even in those countries such as Germany and France where the movement was led by mass Social Democratic Parties, officially pledged to the principles of Marxism, they sided with their own imperialist governments, and did not carry out the Stuttgart Congress decision of the Second International (in 1906) to oppose such an imperialist war by every form of class struggle.

The one exception was Russia. There, from the very outset, the Bolshevik (“majority”) section of the Social Democratic Party, faithful to the decision of the International, consistently struggled against the war. As Lenin pointed out, the war was being fought solely in the interests of the imperialists, of the capitalist class. The only revolutionary *class* policy, therefore, was for the workers of every country to seek to transform the imperialist war into civil war—i.e., into a struggle for State power against their own capitalist class—as a necessary condition for the advance to Socialism and the ultimate abolition of war.

In November 1917, the correctness of this policy was proved by the victory of the Russian workers in the first Socialist Revolution. But the Revolution could never have succeeded had it not been for the leadership of the Bolsheviks, a new type of working-class Party, highly organised and disciplined by years of revolutionary struggle, and basing its practical policy on the theory of class struggle, the science of Marxism.

In Britain the war brought to a head the cleavage between the two tendencies of reformism and class



struggle which had already developed in the Labour movement. Almost immediately after its outbreak the reformist leadership swung over to support of the capitalist government. But the mass of the workers soon realised that the class struggle had not ceased. While they were forbidden to strike, rents and the cost of living were rapidly rising, and the capitalists were making vast fortunes out of the war industries. The result was a tremendous increase in "unofficial" movements—the Shop Stewards and Workers' Committee movement and Rent Strike Committees—leading to the great strikes of the Welsh miners and the Clyde engineers and the fight for the Rent Restriction Act in 1915. In the course of these strikes, new leaders, like Gallacher, Pollitt and Horner, came to the front; and this growing movement was immensely stimulated by the victory of the Russian workers in November 1917, which served to rally and stimulate, in Britain as in other countries, all anti-capitalist tendencies.

### Questions for Discussion

1. *From your own experience, how would you show that "organisation is the main strength of the working class"?*
2. *Why was the war of 1914-18 against the interests of the workers, and why did the working class support the Second World War?*
3. *What is the difference between a militant trade union approach to problems and the Socialist approach?*



## Lesson III

### BETWEEN THE WARS

#### (a) After the First World War

With the ending of the war in 1918 a great opportunity for decisive advances was open to the Labour movement. Between 1917 and 1920 trade union membership shot up from  $5\frac{1}{2}$  to  $8\frac{1}{2}$  million; strikes won concessions for miners, railwaymen and other workers; there was even a police strike. Even more significant of the class consciousness of the workers was the growing support for the "Hands Off Russia" campaign, culminating in August 1920 with the refusal of London dockers to load the *Jolly George* with munitions for the Polish army of intervention. A Council of Action was set up by the T.U.C., and the Government was forced to put an end to open intervention against the Soviet Union by the threat of a General Strike.

As the post-war boom began to give way to a slump, however, the employers sought to impose savage all-round wage cuts, concentrating their attack first on the miners, with a nation-wide lock-out in 1921. The miners appealed to the railwaymen and transport workers, with whom in 1917 they had formed the "Triple Alliance". But though their leaders, J. H. Thomas and Ernest Bevin, issued a call for a general railway and transport strike unless the employers resumed negotiations with the miners, a week later, on April 15, 1921 (Black Friday),



they went back on their word, leaving the miners to their fate. Wage cuts and mass unemployment followed in all industries.

In 1918 the Labour Party constitution had been changed; for the first time its aim was set as public ownership of the means of production, distribution and exchange; and an individual members' section was started, in addition to the affiliated trade unions and Socialist societies. While the first change made it nominally a Socialist party, the second opened its ranks to Liberals and others with no roots in the working-class, who saw in the Labour Party a chance for a successful Parliamentary career. The Liberal Party had declined, and the Labour Party was now the official opposition, under Ramsay MacDonald, Snowden and Thomas. In the 1923 General Election the Labour Party won 191 seats, and the first Labour Government took office with a minority.

In 1920 the Communist Party was founded. On the initiative of the majority of the British Socialist Party (the name taken by the S.D.F. in 1911), a number of revolutionary groupings including the Socialist Labour Party, the South Wales Socialist Society and sections of the Shop Stewards' Committees, came together with the aim of forming a Marxist Party of a new type, based on the experience of the Bolshevik Party. From the outset the Communist Party was affiliated to the Third (Communist) International (1919-43), created by Lenin; and it was due to his direct personal advice that it was able to overcome many of the narrowly sectarian mistakes of earlier Marxist organisations in Britain. As the Labour Party had been formed to unite all working-class organisations, the Communist Party applied for affiliation to the Labour Party. But in spite of the Constitution of the Labour Party, and of the fact that the B.S.P. had been affiliated to it, the right-wing Labour leader-



ship, dominated by Macdonald, led the opposition to working-class unity and succeeded (as it has done ever since) in getting the Communist Party's application defeated.

### **(b) The Capitalist Counter-Offensive**

By 1924 the capitalists had achieved a temporary stabilisation after the profound dislocation of capitalist economy caused by the war and the great slump of 1921. In less than a year they had defeated the minority Labour Government, which had antagonised the workers by opposing strikes for higher wages by the agricultural workers and others.

Under Baldwin's notorious slogan, "All wages must come down," the new Conservative Government at once began an all-round attack on working-class standards and wages, beginning once again with the miners. Once again the miners fought back, this time with growing support from the other organised workers, for which the National Minority Movement was in large measure responsible. Beginning in 1923 in the coalfields, its first national conference in 1924, under the chairmanship of Tom Mann and with Harry Pollitt as its secretary, was attended by delegates representing 200,000 trade unionists; and a year later 1,000,000 organised workers sent delegates to its Conference of Action. Though officially frowned upon by the T.U.C., the Minority Movement not only rallied the rank-and-file: it also exerted influence on the leadership of some of the big trade unions, who on Red Friday (July 31, 1925) checked the attack on the miners by threatening a general stoppage if the miners were locked out. The Government replied by appointing a Commission to inquire into conditions in the industry, thus deferring the conflict until they had made better provision for coping with it.

On a trumped-up charge of sedition the Government



had twelve of the Communist Party leaders sentenced to imprisonment in the autumn of 1925; it recruited a volunteer strike-breaking body, the Organisation for the Maintenance of Supplies; and further strengthened its hand by passing the Emergency Powers Act. Nevertheless, confronted by the growing mass movement of the workers against the all-round attack on wages and conditions, the leaders of the T.U.C. issued orders for the General Strike to begin on May 3, 1926. Their call met with a solid and tremendously enthusiastic response from every section of the workers; and for nine days their solidarity was unbroken. In some areas control was virtually exercised by the Councils of Action which, with the active participation of the Communists, the local Trades Councils had set up in the course of the struggle. When the strike was broken it was not because of any weakening on the part of the workers, nor was it fear of the military who were paraded in the large towns under the direction of Winston Churchill: it was because it had been betrayed by the reformist leadership, who ordered the men back to work. The miners continued their fight for a further six months; but though helped by the Soviet workers, who sent them £1 million, their ultimate defeat was already determined by the betrayal of the General Strike, which opened each section of the workers in turn to further capitalist attacks.

The net result of the betrayal of the General Strike was not only an all-round lowering of working-class standards, but also a disastrous weakening of the organised Labour movement. While employers sacked militants and even refused to employ trade unionists, the Government brought in the Trade Disputes and Trade Union Act of 1927, putting restrictions on strikes and all political activities of trade unions. And this weakening of the militant elements of the trade union



movement made it possible for the right-wing leaders to carry through a policy of open class collaboration (known as Mondism because it was initiated by discussions between the T.U.C. and Alfred Mond, one of the biggest of the monopoly capitalists), which was aimed at speeding up production and "rationalisation" at the expense of the workers and in the interests of the capitalists.

The second Labour Government of 1929 (again a minority, with 287 M.P.s.) took office at the height of a capitalist boom, and joined the right-wing trade union leaders in proclaiming to the workers that the way forward lay in collaborating with the capitalists in order to obtain a share in the growing prosperity. The Communist Party's prediction of the coming slump was denounced as an attempt by agitators to stir up "class-hatred", and its policy won support only amongst a small section of the workers. Yet when the world crisis of 1931 broke out, the most devastating crisis that capitalism had yet experienced, and the number of unemployed soared from  $1\frac{1}{4}$  to 3 million, the Labour Government had no alternative policy to that of the capitalists—all-round cuts in workers' wages and standards to save the "national" economy; and its principal leaders, MacDonald, Snowden and Thomas, actually deserted the Labour Party and agreed to form a "National" Government with Baldwin, Chamberlain, and Simon. But while other Labour leaders, under pressure from the workers, refused to follow MacDonald, the movement was split and confused, and in the General Election of 1931 Labour won only 146 seats.

Resistance to the National Government's policy—demonstrations against the cuts in wages and unemployment pay, in which teachers and civil servants participated, culminating in the mutiny in the Atlantic fleet at



Invergordon—was led only by the Communist Party. For though Attlee was later to condemn MacDonaldism as fascism, neither he nor the other right-wing leaders who succeeded MacDonald in 1931 had broken with the reformist theory which was the very essence of MacDonald's outlook.

### **(c) The Communist Party**

Against the reformist outlook, which opposed class struggle and favoured collaboration with the capitalists, the Communist Party put forward the Marxist policy of working-class unity and class struggle. Its membership was drawn from the ranks of the most militant workers. Because it had firm roots in the organised Labour movement, it was capable of leading masses of people into action, not only on wages, but on every issue affecting ordinary men and women. Because it was organised for action, it was able to play a leading part in every working-class struggle in Britain, and to rouse the British working class on important foreign issues. Because it understood the international character of the struggle for Socialism, it worked to develop solidarity with the Socialist Soviet Union, the working class in other capitalist countries, and the oppressed colonial peoples.

By 1930, ten years after its formation, it had grown considerably in political experience, organisation and leadership, and though numerically it remained small, its influence was out of all proportion to its membership which, prior to the war of 1939, did not exceed 15,000. Moreover, in 1930 this influence was greatly extended by the publication of the *Daily Worker*, the successor of the *Workers' Weekly* and the *Sunday Worker*.

It was under Communist leadership that the National Unemployed Workers' Movement organised the great national Hunger Marches, which won many concessions



for the unemployed. It was the Communist Party that organised the British Battalion of the International Brigade, in which hundreds of its finest members lost their lives fighting for the Spanish Republic. It was they, too, who led the tremendous Aid for Spain movement, at a time when the Labour Party, by its support for the policy of non-intervention, was objectively assisting Franco. And while at home Morrison was urging the London workers to do nothing to stem the growth of Mosley's Blackshirts, it was the Communists who led the mass resistance of the people that swept the fascists from the streets. In the economic struggle, too, it was the Communist Party that gave a clear class lead to the workers. It organised a great Tenants' movement against the continued rise in rents; and, above all, by militant leadership in the trade unions it mobilised the workers in the fight against wage cuts and lowered standards of living.

Thus, as the National Government's foreign policy of support for international fascism made war increasingly inevitable, the Communist Party more and more came to be recognised as a working-class Party of a new type, basing its policy consistently on class struggle in all its forms. Its influence grew considerably. Increasing numbers of Communists were elected to leading positions in the trade unions and the co-operatives in spite of official bans, while at the same time a growing body of professional and intellectual workers joined the Party. But though for a short period in the 1930s, under growing pressure from the rank-and-file, sections of the Labour Party campaigned for unity with the Communist Party, the right-wing leadership succeeded in getting them expelled, and continued to oppose Communist affiliation. And when Chamberlain returned from Munich and announced his betrayal of Czechoslovakia to the House of Commons, the Labour Party vied with



the Conservatives in their hysterical applause. The only voice raised in opposition was that of the single Communist M.P., William Gallacher, who had been elected in 1935.

### Questions for Discussion

1. *Since the Communist Party has always criticised and opposed the Labour Party leadership, why has it consistently sought affiliation to the Labour Party?*
2. *What are the causes of "reformism"? And why has the "reformist" tendency been stronger in the British Labour movement than in most other capitalist countries?*
3. *Why is the publication of a daily paper, the "Daily Worker", of such tremendous importance for the working class, and how can it best be used to ORGANISE the workers?*



## **Lesson IV**

### **THE LABOUR MOVEMENT TODAY**

#### **1. Results of the Second World War**

In the world as a whole, the defeat of fascism resulted in the strengthening of Socialism and the weakening of capitalism and imperialism. The Socialist Soviet Union, having played the major military part in the war, is now one of the two great world powers. It has made good its losses, and is rapidly improving the conditions of its people. With its assistance, the New Democracies have turned out the big capitalists and landowners, and are laying the basis for Socialism, under the leadership of the Communist Parties. In China, Greece, Viet Nam, Malaya and Indonesia the people are carrying on the fight for freedom, in which the working class and the Communist Party are playing the leading role; while in France and Italy great mass Communist Parties are able to exert tremendous influence.

In Britain not only was imperialism greatly weakened by the war, but as a result of their experiences in the struggle against fascism the organised forces of the working class have been considerably strengthened. Trade union membership increased rapidly, and is now over 9 million; Co-operative membership is over 10 million. The individual membership of the Labour Party rose from 400,000 before the war to 645,000 in 1946; and the membership of the Communist Party from 13,000 to over 40,000. The T.U.C. affiliated to the



World Federation of Trade Unions, which for the first time brought together trade unionists in the capitalist countries and those in the Soviet Union.

Moreover, the decisive rejection of the Tories at the General Election of 1945, which by returning 393 Labour members to the House of Commons for the first time made possible a majority Labour Government, marked a tremendous step forward for the working class. For it was the result, on the one hand, of the widespread feeling against the Tories as the Party responsible for the Munich policy that brought about the war, as well as for the cuts in wages, unemployment pay and other social services before the war; and, on the other, of support for the Labour Party's programme. *Let Us Face the Future*. This included nationalisation of the key industries and control of the other sectors of capitalist economy, as a means to ensuring full employment; a big housing programme and a rapid development of the social services; a progressive attitude towards the colonial peoples; and a policy of lasting peace and friendship with the Soviet Union, based on support for the United Nations.

This was not a programme for Socialism. But in the first place, it would have involved sharp clashes with the capitalist class, and it could only have been carried through by mobilising all sections of the workers, inside and outside Parliament. In the second place, it would have decisively ranged Great Britain alongside the Socialist forces in the world in the struggle for peace and democracy, instead of in the reactionary camp of U.S. monopoly capitalism. As a result of the war American imperialism is stronger than ever; her capitalist rulers have been making every effort, especially through the Marshall Plan, to get a firm economic and political grip on Britain and Western Europe, as well as to restore German and Japanese capitalism with



American finance, partly to increase their profits, partly as steps towards war against the Socialist countries.

## 2. The Third Labour Government

In this situation Britain clearly occupies a key position: and particularly the Labour movement, which elected the present Government to office. As we have seen, the Labour movement has both (1) a *reformist* trend, growing out of Liberalism and more and more supporting capitalism in the imperialist stage; and (2) a *revolutionary* trend, aiming to fight capitalism and establish Socialism. Ever since the First World War the reformist right-wing has succeeded in maintaining its leadership of the movement, in spite of frequent opposition from the rank-and-file, by isolating the revolutionary trend and depriving it of its democratic rights within the movement. The Labour Party has refused the affiliation of the Communist Party and banned all association with Communists; while at the same time expelling any of its own members who have fought for a consistent working-class policy.

The Labour Government that took office in 1945 (as well as the General Council of the T.U.C.) remained completely dominated by this reformist trend. Instead of carrying out the policy on which they were elected, they have increasingly supported the interests of the capitalist class and opposed those of the workers. In the industries they have nationalised, the ex-owners have been so handsomely compensated that they are in many cases better off than they would have been, while control remains firmly in the hands of the capitalist class. As the price of "Marshall Aid", whose declared aim is to maintain the capitalist system and prevent the advance of Socialism, they are imposing a wage-freeze and speed-up on the workers, while allowing profits and prices to rise; and have made drastic cuts in housing and the other



social services, while the rich are still allowed to carry out building and decorations up to £1,000 without a licence. And they have failed completely to use their majority in Parliament to make any serious inroads into the capitalist character of the State machine: they carry out a purge against Communists in the Civil Service, but allow Mosley to speak in schools controlled by Labour Councils.

Similarly in its colonial and foreign policy, the Government has consistently supported the forces of reaction against those of progress. It has granted "independence" to the Indian capitalists, but maintains British troops in Greece against the people's Government; while in Malay it has embarked on an imperialist war against the people. It has restored the Nazis to power in the Ruhr industry and has agreed to cheap-labour Japanese textiles cutting into British markets, while doing everything possible to delay trade negotiations with Russia and the New Democracies. Finally, by its whole policy of the "cold war" against the Soviet Union and by negotiating the Atlantic Pact, it is reducing Britain from an independent power to the position of a semi-colony, dependent on the U.S.A. for its economic, political and military policy.

### **3. The Alternative Policy**

Undoubtedly the working class in Britain will learn from its own experience, as it has done in the past—in 1926, and again in 1931—that this policy of class-collaboration for the preservation of capitalism can only lead to economic crisis, unemployment and war (see *Capitalist Society*, Part 2, in this series). And already there are signs that it is doing so: in the growing wage-demands, in the fights against rent increases, the growing resistance to war preparations, etc. But experience has also proved that the fight against capitalism, and against



the policy of the reformist leadership that is supporting capitalism, can only be effective if it is led and co-ordinated by an organised political Party whose policy is based on a consistent and scientific theory of class struggle.

Such a Party exists in the Communist Party, which is not simply an electoral machine, but which helps to organise and lead *every* form of mass struggle by the workers, particularly at the point of production—in the factories, depots, mines, etc. Thus the Factory Branches of the Party are of special importance. They must recruit and train thousands of workers to lead the fight against the wage-freeze and speed-up; against the cuts in housing and hospitals, in health centres and education; against the war in Malaya, the extension of military service to eighteen months and increased military expenditure; against dependence on America and for peace, trade and friendship with the Soviet Union. At the same time the Communist Party is seeking to strengthen its local Branches, in order that the mass struggle in the factories and pits may be combined with the struggle in the wards and Boroughs. For it is only by this combined struggle against the policy of the present right-wing Labour Government, inside and outside Parliament, that a new Government can be secured that will fight capitalism. Such a Government must include representatives of the Communist Party.

In this struggle, the conflict is not between the Communist Party and the Labour, trade union and co-operative movements, but between the Communists, in unity with all those workers who want to fight capitalism and win Socialism, against the leaders of the reformist tendency within the Labour movement who want to preserve capitalism. Thus side by side with the struggle to win the most militant and determined Socialists—in the trade unions, co-operatives and Labour Party—to



read the *Daily Worker* and join the Communist Party, must go the continuous struggle to raise the political understanding and Socialist consciousness of the Communist Party itself. For today the issue between Socialism and capitalism is being fought out, not only on questions of economics and politics, but also in men's minds. There is no special "British" form of Socialism, no "middle way" which can avoid the class struggle, as the right-wing leaders seek to show. Socialist society can only be built when the working class has won power, and the road to power lies in consistent struggle against the capitalists and against the right-wing Labour Government whose policy is leading to the preservation of capitalism and capitalist exploitation. This is the principal lesson that can be learnt from studying the history of the British Labour movement.

### **Questions for Discussion**

1. *What do we mean when we say that the Communist Party is the "highest form of organisation" of the working class?*
2. *From your own experience, show how the fight for wages and conditions is bound up with the struggle for peace.*
3. *How would you show that the policy of the Labour Government today is helping to maintain capitalism?*

### **For Further Study**

*The Communist Manifesto.*

*Lenin and Britain* (Little Lenin Library, No. 26).



# YOUR GUIDE TO ACTION

In the present complicated situation it is only Marxism which can point the way forward for the working class. Here are some of the Marxist classics which are particularly appropriate for study at the present time

	s.	d.
What is Marxism ? .. ..	2	0
Value, Price, and Profit .. ..	2	0
Wage Labour and Capital .. ..	1	0
Deception of the People .. ..		6
Imperialism .. ..	3	0
War and the Workers .. ..		6
Socialism and War .. ..		6
Left-Wing Communism .. ..	1	6
What is to be Done ? .. ..	2	6
State and Revolution ... ..	1	6
Lenin and Stalin on the State ..		6
Fundamental Problems of Marxism .. ..	2	6
Marxism and the National and Colonial Question .. ..	10	6
Dialectics of Nature .. ..	12	6
Anti-Dühring .. ..	8	6
Marx, Selected Works, Vol. I ..	12	6
History of the C.P.S.U.(B) ..	1	6
The Foundations of Leninism	1	0

Obtainable from progressive bookshops; through Branches of the Communist Party; or direct from Central Books Ltd., 2 Parton St., London, W.C.1.



# **COMMUNIST PARTY**

## **SYLLABUSES**

### **MARXISM**

An Introductory Course in Five Parts

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| 2. Capitalist Society .. ..                          | 3d. |
| 3. The State and Democracy ..                        | 3d. |
| 4. The Labour Movement ..                            | 4d. |
| 5. Dialectical and Historical<br>Materialism .. .. . | 4d. |

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**The Communist Party of the Soviet Union** 6d.

**A Study-Guide to the "Communist Manifesto"** .. .. . 3d.

**Communist Leadership** .. .. . 3d.

**The Transition to Socialism** .. .. . 4d.

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